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ABSTRACT

Factors that influence college students' motivation for learning are discussed. When difficult assignments seem unconnected to any highly regarded outcome, students view them as another hurdle to be jumped to receive a good grade. Three influences that enhance intrinsic motivation are choice, optimum challenge, and positive feedback. In general, the more students see their learning as self-determined, the more likely they are to develop intrinsic motivation for what they are learning. For adult students, college programs should make explicit the connection between what adults are learning and why it is important to their lives and aspirations. Today's college students' massive experience with high-tech stimulation makes the average college lecturer much less effective. Too many college instructors are like students in wanting to get the class finished. Motivation is an interactive process: what the student brings to the classroom is affected by what the teacher offers. Today, college students are probably less motivated to participate in abstract learning than ever before. Faculty should address such questions as how to help students develop a positive attitude toward what is taught and how to make the subject matter stimulating. (SW)

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BREAKING THE FINISHING HABIT

by Raymond J. Wlodkowski

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As instructors, we know the scenario all too well. It's the first day of our first course of the semester. We're ready to teach. The break has been good; we feel refreshed and rejuvenated. The fact that we've taught this course many times before does not dismay us. We have changed. Our attitude is positive, our syllabus is new, the students are different. There is one more chance to make it real.

We offer an enthusiastic welcome and distribute our brief but valuable compendium of course contents and requirements. We observe how serious the students look as they read the syllabus, but their silence and frowns do not worry us. After all, enthusiasm and appreciation will take a little time to build.

We want to be helpful. We ask if there are any questions. At first, the group hesitates. Their shyness is appealing. But yes, there is a question. It tumbles out, more suddenly than expected. The voice that carries it is flat, yet aggressive. "When's the final?" The pump has been primed. We look up. There are six more raised hands. The questions of their owners assault us in rapid succession. "Do we *have* to do a term paper?" "How many pages?" "Is there a minimum number of pages?" "Does it *have* to be typed?" "Does it *have* to be referenced?" "What will you do if we don't reference it?" "Is there any penalty for handing it in late?"

We are calm. We are polite. We are direct. We just don't feel as good as we did ten minutes earlier. More questions. "If we come late to class, will you lower our grade?" "How many absences do we get?"

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"Do you offer make-up exams?" Finally, the questions seem ended. We feel relieved. We've survived. Our enthusiasm is dented but not damaged. But wait. There's one more hand, one last question. "If we don't take a break, can we get out earlier?" Things are a bit dimmer now. We reach for our notes and continue, with the vague feeling of having started something that's already been finished.

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How many times this scene will repeat itself for almost any instructor on almost any campus is difficult to estimate. However, it is safe to assume that it is a common occurrence and that it reflects a real dilemma in higher education: the goal of many college students, perhaps a majority, is not to get an education or to enlarge and illuminate their lives, but simply to complete courses, often in piecemeal fashion without any sense of depth or higher purpose. They are finishers, not learners. All of the class's first questions focus on a general, singular need that may be stated as, "Tell me what to do so I can finish this course as simply and easily as possible."

For many college students, completing courses is much more than concrete evidence of accomplishment. It is a paramount goal and a continuing attitude. It may also be a one-way ticket to the end of their chances for lifelong learning. Higher educators advocate helping students "learn how to learn," so as to increase their capacity for successful lifelong learning. However, unless a student develops positive attitudes toward *learning as a process*, the foundation for lifelong learning is woefully lacking. Without the necessary motivation, learning skills become unused and eventually forgotten.

Intrinsic Motivation

The issue of motivation is so important that I want to spend a moment on the concept before relating it to the student behaviors we observe in a class.

Intrinsically motivated action is that which occurs for its own sake, action for which the only rewards are the spontaneous emotions and cognitions that accompany it. Intrinsically motivated behaviors require no external supports or reinforcements for their sustenance (Deci and Ryan, 1985).

Intrinsically motivated *learning* is a type of intrinsically motivated action; it's the proverbial "learning for the sake of learning." When educators talk about students who immerse themselves in a subject area, who take it beyond minimal requirements to enlarge and illuminate their lives they are talking about intrinsically motivated students. Although such students may technically complete a course, they are not *finished* with it. They continue to want to learn more about what they have studied, and their positive motivation for learning in general tends to be enhanced. Everyone gains—the student, present and future instructors, and society.

The three specific factors that enhance intrinsic motivation are choice, optimum challenge, and positive feedback.

In general, the more students see their learning as self-determined the more likely they are to develop intrinsic motivation for what they are learning. The three specific factors that enhance intrinsic motivation are choice, optimum challenge, and positive feedback.

Choice means students believe to a greater than lesser extent that they are the primary cause for their learning. The majority of researchers who have studied intrinsic motivation have emphasized the necessity for helping students see themselves in just such terms. Choice entails subjective judgment. For one student, "getting a job" after college may seem like a wonderful aspiration and courses that contribute to that goal will seem desirable. For another student, "getting a job" after college may seem like a confusing oppression and courses contributing to that goal may seem unfairly coercive. (Today's social and economic realities make the latter perspective more likely to occur.)

When difficult assignments seem unconnected to any highly regarded outcome or merely to be part of required coursework, students view them as another hurdle to be jumped in order to receive, at best, a good grade.

Optimally challenging learning tasks as a concept works off this understanding; learning that is too easy fails to engage student abilities and results in boredom and disinterest, while learning that is too difficult causes stress and anxiety. Students tend to avoid both and, when required to perform such tasks, their intrinsic motivation decreases.

Positive feedback means that students realize concretely that they are doing well at what they are learning. Success and competent performance in any subject are more likely to build student interest than failure and poor performance. (That is why less able students, for whom college is often a struggle, are less likely to find higher education an intrinsically motivating experience.)

It is important to note that it is the combination of choice, optimum challenge, and positive feedback that increases student chances of an intrinsically motivating college experience where real depth of study and broader goals may be served.

As we turn now to issues of student orientation and current instructional patterns, it will become obvious that interventions beyond change in curricular content may be necessary in order to get the kinds of student learning we desire.

Recent reports argue that the cultural press to "get a job" is the major force propelling students toward pragmatic, "finishing" attitudes toward studies. I strongly agree; the job market is more competitive, the economy is tighter, and the credentialing process is more severe. In many ways college students are only playing the get-a-job game as best they can.

However, in my opinion, there are at least two more forces that contribute to this malaise in a manner that may have as severe an impact on student desire for learning as the immediate need for a job. The first is that there are more older students on our campuses than ever before. Their adult needs increase a pragmatic orientation toward coursework. The second is that we as instructors support and maintain such limiting student attitudes by the way we teach.

Adults as Learners

In the last few decades, colleges and universities have absorbed an

ever-increasing number of older students, especially in urban institutions and graduate programs. These adults have added a new flavor and perspective to college campuses. They are parents and workers. For them, education is seldom a primary focus; their jobs and children do not allow for such a solitary pursuit. Their presence has probably increased the immediate vocational pragmatism of many college programs. While younger students worry about getting a job, older students worry about keeping a job. Unemployment is not a figment of someone's imagination. Adults may also see college courses as a necessary step for promotion and increased salaries. They may feel very little sense of choice or volition about such matters.

Increasing the number of required humanities courses will not end such concerns. Moving more toward the strengths of adult learners will have a more positive outcome. These strengths are their self-determination and deep need for competence.

Adults, by definition, are people who take essential responsibility for their own lives. They make choices and hold themselves accountable for the consequences of those decisions. Self-determination is their developmental cornerstone. They also very much want to be competent—effective at what they value. They don't want to be just parents, lawyers, and teachers. They want to be *good* parents, *fine* lawyers, and *excellent* teachers.

Any college course or curriculum can take advantage of these developmental needs. It should relate to the realities of adult daily existence, and make explicit the connection between what adults are learning and why it is important to their lives and aspirations. This connection need not be a narrow vocational one. The critical quality is that it is an essential and evident connection. This makes such college courses and programs *worthy* of adult choice. The question for instructors and program developers is, "What can adults understand and apply from what we offer?" This is as true for a history course as it is for an engineering course. Masterful teachers tend to naturally do this. As Epstein (1981, p. xii) reports, "What all great teachers appear to have in common is love of their subject, an obvious satisfaction in arousing this love in their students, and an ability to convince them that what they are being taught is deadly serious."

Too many college instructors are finishers themselves—getting classes over with to get on to their own, more rewarded goals of research and publication.

The scenario that began this article would have been far less likely to occur if the instructor had clearly outlined his or her objectives and requirements, and then explained how they might relate to the actual needs and ambitions of the students.

When able students are presented with appropriately difficult learning tasks that lead to ideas and skills that will make a difference in their lives, they are much more likely to embrace the demands of the course. The value of doing the necessary work is apparent. High achievement becomes more desired; positive feedback becomes more possible. But when difficult assignments seem unconnected to any highly regarded outcome or merely to be part of required coursework, students view them as another hurdle to be jumped in order to receive, at best, a good grade. Such a perception leads students to apply the "minimax principle" that prompts attempts to maximize their extrinsic reward (grade) with a minimum amount of effort. Under such conditions, whatever information can lead to the highest grade possible for the least amount of work is extremely valued. Finishing questions and attitudes abound in this situation.

The Teacher's Role

The second force that limits student motivation for learning, the way we teach college courses, includes, in its broadest sense, who teaches as well as how the course is taught.

In general, we have probably moved too far toward a consumer orientation in higher education. Attracting students and keeping them in class may be, in too many instances, more important than what they learn. In an individual college course, this tendency manifests itself in many indirect and subtle ways—lowering standards, inflating grades, allowing extra work to raise low test scores, decreasing reading and writing requirements, and so on. In such ways, we convey the message, "Let's get along. I'll help you finish this course." This does nothing to enhance intrinsic motivation and makes cursory course completion more paramount in the eyes of students.

I do not imply by this criticism that we should return to a "sink or swim/take it or leave it" mentality

toward college students. There is no going back. College students are too different. And no amount of griping or wishful thinking will change that fact.

Studies indicate that entering college students are academically less skilled and knowledgeable than in the past. What I wish to emphasize is how today's students are *perceptually* different. They are the most media-bred generation ever to enter college. By the time they are freshmen they have watched 15,000 hours of television and logged additional thousands of hours watching films and listening to stereo recorders and radios. These are *passive* forms of stimulation. One simply turns a switch and the process takes place. There is little need to expend effort, persevere, or concentrate in order to be stimulated.

Students bring this perceptual context with them to the college classroom. More often than not they hear a lecture, which is another form of passive stimulation. Does Professor Smith do it as well as Johnny Carson, Dan Rather, or Bruce Springsteen? I think not, and this is no fault of the student. Stimulation is a relative process based on previous experience, learning, and situational context. So is boredom. And it is the latter process that is far more likely to occur than ever was possible in the past. Today's college students' massive experience with high-tech stimulation makes the average college lecturer much less effective, perhaps on the road to becoming a dinosaur. This dilemma highlights the need for excellent, motivating teaching on college campuses everywhere.

For too long we have expected students to be the sole providers of their motivation for learning. They do have the majority of responsibility for their effort, perseverence, and concentration. I do not question this. However, motivation is an interactive process. What the student brings to the classroom is affected by what the teacher offers. Sixteen weeks of poorly exemplified, monotone lecturing is going to have a detrimental effect on even the most motivated students. If we value increases in learning, breadth of vision, and continuing motivation among college students, then we must model this in our teaching. Too many college instructors are finishers themselves—getting classes over with to get on to their own, more rewarded goals of research and publication. Finishers produce finishers.

I am pleased to see that the call for greater emphasis on the humanities in undergraduate education has also included the demand for a higher quality of teaching in these courses. But this is true for any discipline. Knowledge is not in and of itself motivating. It is the presentation and process of learning knowledge that can make it compelling. By virtue of their culture and preparation, today's college students are probably less motivated to participate in abstract learning than ever before. Our finest instructors should be teaching them.

These teachers will have their best chance for success when they see their role as helping students to learn so that they *want* to learn what we have to teach. Standards do not have to be lowered, but questions such as: How can I help these students develop a positive attitude toward what I am teaching? How can I make this subject matter stimulating? and, How can I help students realize their growing competence? will have to be addressed. Otherwise, the chances of developing a sense of choice and challenge for college students seems quite slim.

Fortunately, there are many possible answers to these questions. The fields of psychology, sociology, and communications have made significant contributions in the last decade toward a better understanding of motivation and effective instruction.

One thing is certain. Intrinsic motivation for learning cannot be mandated. Required courses of any nature do not automatically build student interest. In fact, required courses above all others must be taught in the most appealing manner possible because they seem initially coercive. When students do not like what they have been made to do and can see no end in sight, what other choice do they have but to finish and be done with it? ■

When students do not like what they have been made to do and can see no end in sight, what other choice do they have but to finish and be done with it?

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